LIFE BOOK REVIEW

A heritage of smoke

A HERITAGE OF STONE
by JIM GARRISON
(G. P. Putnam's Sons) $6.95

AMERICAN GROTESQUE
by JAMES KIRKWOOD
(Simon & Schuster) $11.95

Some chronic ache in the American spirit keeps taking us back to that Friday in November seven years ago. It was, to many, The Day Things Started To Go Wrong. Perhaps gaiety went out of American life on the day John Kennedy was murdered; maybe that's why we can't let the subject lie. It seems a kind of collective search for lost joy and innocence and, like every such search, futile.

But this search has a dark side. The Warren Report has left us with the lone misfit and his rifle. On the assumption that this explanation isn't good enough, that it's unworthy, somehow, of the crime, we seem to have a perverse urge to discover conspiracy—the bigger the better. To satisfy this urge history has offered us Jim Garrison, the New Orleans district attorney. Garrison developed a

Jim Garrison explicating

flimsy theory, irresponsibly trumpeted it, tried to bully and coax stray facts and nonfacts into the greatest crime-busting coup of the century and persecuted Clay Shaw. And the saddest irony of all: in his heavy-footed effort to solve what mystery remained, Garrison has probably made it impossible for anyone to solve it.

Garrison's book is all smoke. Kennedy was killed, he tells us, because he opposed the Vietnam war and yearned to launch a Pax Americana. To the master schemers on duty at military-industrial-complex headquarters, this was intolerable; they needed that war in Asia. Thus Kennedy had to be killed, and a labyrinthian CIA plot had to be concocted to do the job. And thus also, five years later, his brother and Martin Luther King had to be dealt with the same way. At its broadest, which is broad enough to reach from Rochester to Rangoon, Garrison's indictment charges the same evil force with responsibility for every sour development of the last seven years, saving only acts of nature. Only he, Garrison, has been privileged to see the truth. Everyone else is either an agent of the conspiracy or a dupe of it. The sinister forces have thwarted him, but the voters of New Orleans love him yet. Martyrdom beckons.

James Kirkwood's *American Grotesque* is about the trial of Clay Shaw. Kirkwood is a novelist (*Good Times/Bad Times*) and as such qualified to roam in this field. He begins with an apology for his subjectivity, declaring himself to be a partisan of Shaw and a foe of Garrison, a conviction that remains intact through 655 pages spent tediously reconstructing the events before, during and after the trial.

Kirkwood seems to have checked his novelist's baggage at the airport. His excesses are those of the newspaper-of-record: we get too many transcripts of courtroom testimony, too many documents reproduced in their entirety, too few insights, flashes of color or character portraits. He interviews everyone, finds something to admire or respect in everyone and prattles on too long about this technique. Poor Shaw remains as one-dimensional as he was in the daily press, a starchy figure oozing poignant charm, bearing his cross with 6-foot-4 dignity. The state's chief witness, Perry Raymond Russo, wallows in obfuscating contradictions, his motivation forever enigmatic. The judge, who doesn't care for homosexuals, is arrested nine and a half months after the trial in a raid on a stag movie party.

It is a squalid exercise. The fact that half a dozen witnesses could be found willing to link Shaw, in one smoky way or another, to Lee Oswald is hardly more cheering than the existence of a district attorney willing to malign a man's reputation with such a thin tissue of overheated circumstance. Neither Garrison nor Kirkwood adds light, in the end, to the agony of our long night, and we're left where we began—with a dead prince, with the flawed and unsatisfying Warren Report, with the miserable Oswald making all of us suffer for his puniness, suffering most of all for history's unromantic grubbiness.

by Donald Jackson
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